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ABSTRACT

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Running head: ATTITUDES

Prejudice or Preference? Attitudes of Gay and Lesbian Christians

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Abstract

Research on the attitudes of heterosexual churchgoers is extensive. However, very little empirical information is available about the attitudes held by gay and lesbian Christians. In the current study, it was hypothesized that gay and lesbian Christians, unlike their heterosexual peers, would demonstrate desire for and acceptance of social closeness with other gay and lesbian people, whether or not the person was sexually active, and would desire social distance from homophobic persons and those who reject same-sex relationships. Results of questionnaires completed by 282 gay men and lesbians confirms these hypotheses and indicate significant relationships between social distance and religious motivation and an individual's approach to scripture. Results also suggest that social distance may be an inadequate measure of prejudice in this population.

Prejudice or Preference? Attitudes of Gay and Lesbian Christians

Research on prejudice has yielded varying results, indicating that the relationship between religion and prejudice is a complex one. Most studies indicate that many factors play significant mediating roles between religion and prejudice. Among these variables are denominational affiliation, religious motivation, the social desirability of prejudice, fundamentalism, authoritarianism, and orthodoxy (Altemeyer & Hunsberger, 1992; Batson, 1976; Batson, Naifeh, & Pate, 1978; Duck & Hunsberger, 1999; Fisher et al., 1994; Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999; Gorsuch, 1993; Herek, 1987; Hunsberger, 1995, 1996; Kirkpatrick, 1993; McFarland, 1989). After accounting for these factors, a neutral relationship is usually observed between religion and anti-gay beliefs.

Reconciling sexual orientation and Christianity is a difficult process for many gay men and lesbian women (Kelly, 1995; Lynch, 1996). Many gay and lesbian Christians were raised in homes or churches in which the Bible was interpreted literally and understood to be condemning of homosexual behavior. Further, church teaching in most Christian denominations has also historically condemned most same-sex sexual behavior. These experiences have led many gay and lesbian Christians to discount the value of the Bible and church tradition, while others continue to embrace the Bible while rejecting scriptural literalism. Parts of the Christian church, particularly in America and Europe, have become increasingly pluralistic in approach to and acceptance of homosexuality, viewing Christianity as a faith which can be both sex-affirming and provide positive resources for lesbians and gay men (Nelson, 1981, 1982). This movement has included the establishment of explicitly gay and lesbian-affirming denominations, groups within

established denominations or movements, and identification of gay and lesbian-friendly individual congregations, which vary widely in approach to scripture and liturgy. Gay and lesbian people often seek out these gay-affirming congregations. This study explored the attitudes of gay and lesbian Christians attending these affirming churches and participating in affirming parachurch organizations.

Religious motivation is one of the factors which influences the relationship between religion and prejudice. Religious motivation is a means of conceptualizing individual religiousness or an overall approach to religion (Van Wicklin, 1990). The most important studies in this area have grown out of the work of Allport (1950) on Intrinsic (I) and Extrinsic (E) religiousness and Batson's (1976) proposal of the Quest orientation. In general, those who score high in Intrinsic motivation are those for whom religious beliefs and practices represent an end within themselves. That is, Intrinsics participate in religion for its own sake. In contrast, those who are high in Extrinsic Social motivation participate in religious activities because they offer social rewards or reinforcement, such as making new friends. Those high in Extrinsic Personal motivation often participate in religious activities because of an external reward such as being seen as a "good person" or avoiding an anticipated punishment, such as being condemned. Individuals who score high in Quest motivation are characterized by an ongoing search for meaning and an openness to and acceptance of religious doubt. Over fifty studies suggest that I, E, and Quest are independent measures (Batson & Schoenrade, 1991a, 1991b). Thus, an individual's score on one of the religious motivation scales does not necessarily predict scores on the other scales.

Prejudice

Fulton, Gorsuch, and Maynard (1999) measured prejudice by the social distance individuals desired between themselves and members of other groups, a model applied in the current study. They asserted that some Christians, particularly those who score high on measures of fundamentalism and extrinsic religious motivation, tend to be more discriminating against gay men and lesbian women than against other "biblically condemned" groups (liars, alcoholics, overeaters, sexually active unmarried heterosexuals). This research suggested that intrinsically committed (heterosexual) Christians can make a distinction between a theological position which is condemning of homosexuality and non-theological discrimination ("Hate the sin, love the sinner"), while others insist than any form of anti-homosexual sentiment is in itself prejudicial. Research on the attitudes and perspectives of heterosexual churchgoers is extensive. However, very little empirical information is available about the attitudes held by gay and lesbian Christians. In the current study, it was hypothesized that gay and lesbian Christians, unlike their heterosexual peers, would demonstrate a desire for and acceptance of social closeness with other gay and lesbian people, whether or not the person was celibate or sexually active. In fact, it was hypothesized that sexual orientation and sexual activity would not be a salient factor for gay and lesbian Christians as they made decisions about social distance. However, due to their own experiences with discrimination, it was expected that gay and lesbian Christians would desire social distance both from those who are afraid of them as gay or lesbian people (homophobes) or reject their choice of same-sex partners (those who accept gay and lesbian people but

reject same-sex sexual behavior), as well as those who are discriminating in other ways (racists). Like their heterosexual peers, it was hypothesized that gay and lesbian Christians would also desire social distance from some other culturally condemned individuals (e.g. child abusers).

Method

Participants

A questionnaire was administered to gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered adults attending Christian church services and church-related activities in the Los Angeles area. Participants were recruited from fourteen explicitly gay and lesbian-affirming churches and two parachurch groups. These groups represented nine denominations. One hundred seventy-five (175) gay men and 107 lesbian women participated in the study, yielding 282 usable surveys. Due to small sample sizes, the responses from bisexual men (4), bisexual women (7), and one transgendered participant were not included in the data analysis.

Participants ranged in age from 21 to 75 years, with a mean age of 44.6. The mean age for men was 44.8 years, and the mean age for women was 44.3 years. The difference in ages between men and women was not statistically significant. The majority of participants were Caucasian (69.9%), with participation from African-American (8.9%), Asian-American (4.6%), Latino (11%), Native American (1.4%), and multi-ethnic or other ethnic participants (4.2%). The sample included Catholic (22.7%), Episcopalian (20.2%), and Protestant (35.1%) participants, as well as those who identified themselves as adherents of other Christian denominations (19.9%) or non-

denominational Christian groups (2.1%). The size and diversity of the sample represent one of the greatest strengths of the current research and suggest that the results are applicable to members of many other gay and lesbian-affirming churches.

Measures

Data were gathered through a self-report questionnaire. The researcher adhered to all ethical guidelines, including the procurement of informed consent of participants.

Demographic information. Demographic variables included age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and denomination.

Religious beliefs, values, motivation, and behavior. Scriptural Literalism was measured by the Scriptural Literalism Scale (SLS), Form C (Hogge & Friedman, 1967), which had a reliability of .61 in this study. The SLS was adapted to use a 7-point scale for each item. Religious motivation was measured using Gorsuch and McPherson's (1989) I/E-Revised scale (Intrinsic a = .48, Extrinsic Social a = .74, Extrinsic Personal a = .67) and Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis' (1993) Quest scale (a = .71), both of which were adapted to use a 7-point scale for each item. Social distance was measured with a social distance scale adapted from Fulton (1990) (a = .86), and included items measuring participants' attitudes toward persons of all sexual orientations, sexually active and celibate persons, married and unmarried persons, persons described as "homophobes" (individuals who are afraid of gay or lesbian people), other "biblically condemned" groups (alcoholics, liars, overeaters), racists, and other socially accepted or neutral groups (environmentalists, social activists).

Results

Multivariate analysis comparing men and women revealed no significant differences between gay men and lesbian women. Thus, the remaining analyses collapsed across sex. See Table 1 for a summary of the sample characteristics.

Measures of social distance asked participants to indicate the level of social distance they would like from others. A high score indicated the greatest desire for social distance, whereas a low score indicated a desire for or acceptance of social closeness. See Table 2 for a summary of the social distance desired by participants from "Biblically condemned" individuals (alcoholics, chronic liars, overeaters, and sexually active unmarried persons of all sexual orientations)(Fulton, Gorsuch, & Maynard, 1999), socially condemned individuals (child abusers, drug abusers, racists, and sex and love addicts), individuals of special interest to many gay and lesbian churchgoers (fundamentalists, liberal Christians, homophobes, and persons who accept gay and lesbian people but reject same-sex sexual behavior), and socially accepted individuals (celibate persons of all sexual orientations, married heterosexuals, environmentalists, and social activists).

Participants were expected to demonstrate a greater willingness to have social closeness to sexually active gay men and lesbians, celibate gay men and lesbians, sexually active unmarried heterosexuals, and celibate heterosexuals than to racists, child abusers, and those who are homophobic or who accept gay and lesbian persons but reject same-sex sexual behavior. The means were added and averaged for each group and tested against each other. This analysis indicates that participants desired more social distance from

racists, child abusers, homophobes, and those who accept gay and lesbian persons but reject same-sex sexual behavior than from celibate gay and lesbian persons, celibate heterosexuals, and sexually active gays, lesbians, and unmarried heterosexuals (mean difference = 2.71, $t = 39.81$, $p < .0001$), confirming this hypothesis.

Multivariate analysis of the relationship between the set of social distance items and the set of religious motivation measures revealed a significant relationship overall ($R = .15$, $p < .005$). Though statistically significant, many of the correlations, both positive and negative, were below the $r = .15$ level. Thus, to protect against family-wise error, only hypothesized data are discussed. Modest significant negative correlations were noted between Intrinsic religious motivation and social distance from alcoholics, environmentalists, fundamentalists, and social activists. This result indicates that as intrinsic motivation rises, acceptance of social closeness to these groups also rises. Modest significant negative correlations were also noted between Quest motivation and social distance from drug abusers, environmentalists, and liberal Christians. Thus, as Quest motivation rises, acceptance of social closeness to these individuals increases. See Table 3 for these results.

Participants gave moderate scores on the Scriptural Literalism Scale, indicating that they do not adhere to a literal interpretation of scripture overall. However, a significant multivariate relationship was noted between scriptural literalism and social distance ($R = .11$, $p < .0001$). Although the overall correlation was significant, most of the correlations, both positive and negative, were below the $r = .15$ level and are not included in the present discussion. A negative correlation was revealed between

scriptural literalism and social distance from Fundamentalists (r = -.28), indicating that the greater the level of scriptural literalism, the more comfortable individuals are with closeness to Fundamentalists. Also, a positive correlation was noted between scriptural literalism and social distance from sexually active gay men and lesbians (r = .19). Thus, the greater the level of scriptural literalism, the more distance individuals desired from sexually active gay and lesbian peers.

Discussion

Analysis of social distance measures revealed that participants felt comfortable with social closeness to both celibate and sexually active persons of all sexual orientations but desired more social distance from other socially condemned groups (racists, child abusers) and from those who are fearful of gay and lesbian persons (homophobes) or who accept gay and lesbian persons but reject same-sex sexual relationships. This finding makes sense in light of the fact that gay and lesbian persons most often grow up in homes with heterosexual parents and siblings, and are exposed to people of all sexual orientations. Many have also participated in heterosexual relationships as adolescents or adults. Relational experiences like these may lead to acceptance of heterosexuals.

The relationship between Intrinsic religious motivation and social distance from alcoholics and fundamentalists suggest that those who are most committed to their faith for its own sake are able to accept alcoholic persons and those with whom they may not agree theologically. This relationship between intrinsicness and the ability to distinguish a theological position from a personal one is similar to that found by Fulton, Gorsuch, and

Maynard (1999). The modest negative correlation between Quest motivation and social distance from drug abusers also fits this paradigm, with those most open to religious questioning and an ongoing search for meaning those most likely to accept social closeness with those who abuse drugs.

Those who scored high in Intrinsic religious motivation were also most likely to be accepting of fundamentalists. This acceptance of fundamentalists by those high in Intrinsic motivation may be the result of a number of factors. Although many of the participants might disagree with the particular beliefs or strategies employed by fundamentalists, they may be able to appreciate the fundamentalists' adherence to religious beliefs and the practical application of those beliefs in everyday life. Also, those high in fundamentalism tend to be high in intrinsic motivation. Overall, the experiences of gay men and lesbian women with prejudice may lead to acceptance of other people, including others who have been socially or religiously condemned.

The relationship between scriptural literalism and social distance from fundamentalists indicates that those who hold the most literal interpretation of scripture are most comfortable relating to fundamentalists. The relationship between scriptural literalism and desire for social distance from sexually active gay men and lesbians suggests that the more literally individuals interpret the Bible, the more uncomfortable they are relating to sexually active gay or lesbian persons. While these relationships do not yield surprising results overall, it is important to note that these responses were those of gay and lesbian churchgoers, indicating that even gay and lesbian Christians often embrace a more literal interpretation of scripture which leads to a desire for social

distance from sexually active peers, a phenomena some participants described as "internalized homophobia."

Scriptural literalism hovered around the median, suggesting that these Christians have not entirely rejected literal approaches to the Bible and appear to be using the Bible in concert with other sources when making decisions. However, the positive correlation between scriptural literalism and Intrinsic motivation indicates that those who are most committed to scriptural literalism are those for whom religion is most important in and of itself. It is important to note that the Scriptural Literalism Scale measures literal interpretation of the Bible rather than the authority given to scripture by the individual.

Like many other projects of its type, this study utilized a social distance measure (adapted from Fulton, 1990) to broadly assess prejudice. Results of the study, however, suggest that caution is warranted in equating the desire for social distance with prejudice. Instead, the desire for social distance may represent a response consistent with self-protection or discernment. For example, participants in this study desired social distance both from those who are afraid of gay and lesbian people ("homophobes") and from those who accept gay and lesbians individuals but reject their sexual relationships (those who endorse the "Hate the sin, love the sinner" idea). In light of the negative experiences many gay and lesbian Christians have had with these types of individuals, the expressed desire for social distance may be more reflective of a sense of healthy self-esteem, self-protection, or wise discernment, rather than a destructive prejudice.

A number of features of this study are worthy of note. First, all of the participants were recruited from explicitly gay and lesbian-affirming churches and parachurch

organizations. Thus, individuals who identify as gay or lesbian but are not participating in openly affirming activities were underrepresented in the study, as were individuals who are attracted to members of the same sex but have elected not to identify as gay or lesbian or have elected to remain celibate. Second, the measures used in this study contained inherent limitations. For example, the scriptural literalism scale does not provide an accurate measure of the authority that individuals assign to the Bible. Third, participants in the study later revealed multiple interpretations of the phrase "sexually active." While most participants assumed that sexually active individuals were those who were not celibate, others equated the term with promiscuity. Thus, further research should consider the potentially different attitudes of gay and lesbian Christians toward those who are sexually active with multiple partners and those who are sexually exclusive. Finally, one of the significant strengths of the current study lies in the size and diversity of the sample. The results of this study are thus amenable to generalizing to the larger group of church-attending gay and lesbian Christians.

Overall, results of this study indicate that gay and lesbian Christians possess many of the same religious attitudes and motivations as heterosexual churchgoers. The most significant exception to this is the social acceptance of sexually active gay men, lesbians, and unmarried heterosexuals.

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Table 1

Sample Characteristics

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Scriptural Literalism	4.19	0.74
Intrinsic Religious Motivation (I)	5.28	0.77
Extrinsic Social Motivation (Es)	3.09	1.40
Extrinsic Personal Motivation (Ep)	4.44	1.31
Quest Motivation (Q)	4.29	0.80

Note. All items and scales were scored on a 1 - 7 scale, where 1 indicated the least agreement and 7 indicated the greatest agreement. All scales were then divided by the total number of items, resulting in comparable metrics (potential range 1-7) for all total scores reported above.

Table 2

Social Distance

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
"Biblically Condemned"		
Alcoholic	3.03	1.25
Liar	4.27	1.11
Overeater	1.76	0.90
Sexually Active G or L*	1.44	0.77
Sexually Active Het*	1.62	0.86
Socially Condemned		
Child Abuser**	4.88	1.23
Drug Abuser	3.70	1.41
Racist**	4.79	1.26
Sex or Love Addict	2.92	1.30
Of Special Interest to Gays and Lesbians		
Fundamentalist	3.22	1.48
Liberal Christian	1.80	1.06
Homophobe**	4.13	1.39
Person accepts and rejects**	3.13	1.30

(table continues)

Table 2 continued

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation
Socially Accepted		
Celibate G or L*	1.48	0.79
Celibate Het*	1.56	0.80
Married Het	1.51	0.75
Environmentalist	1.86	0.99
Social Activist	1.74	1.02

Note. All social distance items were measured on a 1-6 scale, where a score of 1 indicated comfort with the person as a close friend and a score of 6 indicated the desire for the person to live in another country. Thus, the higher the score, the more social distance is desired. A low score indicates comfort with social closeness.

* indicates those variables compared as a group to a second set of variables (noted by **) to test the social distance hypothesis.